

The Merchant of Venice

by Peter Cash



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SCOPE OF TOPIC

The Merchant of Venice is a product of Renaissance humanism. Accordingly, Shakespeare's aims in the play are

- a] to present us with a comprehensive view of a flawed humanity: in particular, to demonstrate how man – a fallen creature – struggles to preserve his integrity against the force of his circumstances;
- b] to undertake a ruthless examination of human motives: in particular, to discover whether man lives by/makes his judgements by the head (does he take calculated risks?) or by the heart (is he swayed by emotion?) or by the eyes (is he ultimately influenced by appearances?);
- c] to assay human values in order to determine man's sense of priorities: in particular, to assess whether man – regardless of race – is motivated by love or by money;
- d] to explore the difficulties that attend man's moral choices: in particular, to illustrate that there are common human dilemmas which – being impossible to resolve – first excite laughter, but ultimately inspire pity for our lapsed condition.

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ACT I Scene 1

The function of Act I Scene 1 is exposition. Antonio (one of the two candidates for 'the merchant of Venice') presents himself in a despondent mood. He gives out the impression that he is of a melancholy disposition, but would have us believe that he does not know why: "In sooth I know not why I am so sad." But Antonio is being disingenuous; his statement that he has 'much ado' to know himself is a kind of pretence. As we shall see, he knows perfectly well why he has a troubled sense of personal identity.

Salerio attributes Antonio's turmoil to the fact that he is a merchant-venturer whose 'argosies' are on the high seas laden with valuable cargo. Solanio too attributes Antonio's unease to

the perils of venture-capitalism; he too is certain that Antonio fears 'misfortune to [his] ventures'. Salerio's next speech is designed to reinforce in an audience's mind the idea that Antonio, being a 'merchant of Venice', is in a risky business; on Antonio's behalf, he expresses those anxieties that are bound to run through the mind of a man whose 'spices' and 'silks' are at the continual mercy of harmful winds, 'dangerous rocks' and 'roaring waters'. The significance of this speech for the plot will become apparent in Act III when Antonio's ships are indeed reported to have sunk and he stands on the verge of bankruptcy.

Antonio's reply – that his 'ventures are not in one bottom trusted' – explains that he has taken the precaution of spreading his risk. If it is not his 'merchandise' which makes him 'sad', then – says Solanio – he must be 'in love'. Solanio's use of language ('by two-headed Janus/'strange fellows') gives us our first clue that Antonio has an unconventional sexual orientation: if not homosexual, then bisexual.

The entrance of Bassanio gives point to this observation. Both Solanio's allusion to 'better company' and Salerio's nod to 'worthier friends' nudge our awareness that Antonio has an eye for Bassanio; these two references alert an audience to the fact that Antonio's crush is common knowledge. If it is, then Bassanio's reaction to his reception ('exceeding strange') suggests that he himself is uncommonly unaware ... Lorenzo too ("... since you have found Antonio ...") amuses himself with the thought that he is leaving Bassanio (who is straight) alone with Antonio (who isn't). These sneers at Antonio's sexuality do much to prepare us for the moral climate of Venice: first homophobic, then of course racist. Finally, Gratiano ("You look not well, signor Antonio") cannot resist his own snigger at Antonio's disconsolate posture. Disingenuously, he says that he cannot understand why Antonio – his shoulders slumped, his expression morose – is 'marvellously changed'. For his own part, Antonio continues to play the theatrical role of a melancholy man.

Gratiano is something of a rough diamond; he is gregarious and garrulous/loquacious. His function is to make a criticism of Antonio's theatrical posturing, his melancholy pose: in particular, he criticises Antonio for his 'wilful stillness'/for putting on his agony. In his frank way, he makes it clear that he has no time for such poseurs/no time for people who 'fish' for compliments with 'melancholy bait': in short, he accuses Antonio of indulging in self-pity. Lorenzo confirms that Gratiano ('never lets me speak') is too talkative and gossipy: after such a criticism, Gratiano cannot wait to change the subject and quit Antonio's company. Antonio, then, is surrounded by fellow Venetians who are rather embarrassed by his homosexuality and discreetly take their leaves.

Bassanio's first thought is for Antonio's hurt feelings; he too makes an issue of Gratiano's talkativeness ('speaks an infinite deal of nothing'). "Don't bother listening to him," Bassanio seems to say. But Antonio is not so easily consolable. His first words to Bassanio – "Tell me now what lady ..." – makes clear what has really been on his mind; he has been brooding jealously over Bassanio's interest in women. No wonder, then, that Bassanio chooses his words of explanation carefully. He reminds Antonio that he is a spendthrift: that he has 'disabled [his] estate' and does not have the 'means' to furnish his expedition up the coast to Belmont where the fair lady lives. Bassanio confesses that he has been 'something too prodigal': that he has spent his money recklessly and is in a great deal of debt. It is for this reason that he needs to prevail upon his best friend to lend him the money to furnish his Belmont expedition.

Already, it is becoming clear that Bassanio is asking a lot. It is bad enough that he has lived beyond his means and must now ask a friend for a loan; it is worse that he is asking a homosexual friend and admirer to make a loan so that he can woo a woman. So far, then, Bassanio stands accused and indicted of gross profligacy and gross tactlessness, but what is *worse still* is that he is about to ask Antonio to lend him money which Antonio himself does not have; thirdly, then, Bassanio stand accused of gross selfishness.

Bassanio's argument is that of a born gambler, a reckless risk-taker who, rather than learn from his previous mistakes and losses, cannot resist the urge to repeat them. Bassanio is an irresponsible adventurer – in his own words, 'a wilful youth' – whose attitude to his losses is cavalier; his arrow-metaphor explains his basic philosophy: Double or Quits. In short, he is a compulsive gambler who is prepared to 'hazard all he hath' in a make-or-break endeavour to secure his fortune.

Antonio's reaction to this outrageous request ought to be wary, but it isn't: so infatuated with Bassanio is he that he is instantly prepared to do his 'utmost' to help him. In effect, Antonio is saying to his profligate, tactless and selfish friend, "You don't have to ask ..."

Bassanio explains that in Belmont is 'a lady richly left'. The significance of this statement is that it immediately identifies for us Bassanio's sense of priorities: first and foremost, he is attracted to this lady because she is wealthy. Of secondary importance only are her 'wondrous virtues': mainly, that Portia is 'fair' and chaste and no doubt passionate. In short, Portia (as we shall see) is a paragon of Renaissance womanhood in whom the classical graces – of beauty, chastity and passion – are perfectly balanced and combined; but Bassanio's description of her is nevertheless coloured by adjectives and nouns which repeatedly draw attention to her wealth; his use of language ('undervalued worth') draws attention to his mercenary nature. Bassanio is a pot-hunter; in setting off 'in quest of' Portia, he is simply in search of a trophy-wife. His comparison of himself to Jason flatters him; with his purely mercenary motives, he is no mythological hero.

After the next exchange, Bassanio's moral character becomes even clearer. He pleads with Antonio ("Oh my Antonio ...") to lend him a vast sum of money which Antonio ("Thou know'st that all my fortunes are at sea") does not have to hand: in short, he is urging his friend to take an enormous risk on his behalf. Consequently, Antonio's sudden imperative ("Therefore go forth ...") is not logical; rather, it is the response of a hopelessly-in-love individual who has been emotionally black-mailed into making a very bad decision. Antonio ("Try what my credit can in Venice do") is generous to a fault; he is instantly prepared to over-reach himself ("racked even to the uttermost") in order to please the object of his affections/passion.

This exchange sets up one of the central conflicts in the play: between Belmont and Venice. This conflict is between two worlds and two sets of values: between Belmont (with its fairy-tale landscape and indolent atmosphere) and Venice (with its everyday reality, its bustling atmosphere of commerce and trade).

ACT I Scene 2

Whereas Scene 1 is set in the business world of Venice, Scene 2 is set in the opulent splendour of Belmont. When we meet 'fair Portia', she is reclining in lavish surroundings with soft furnishings and expressing to Nerissa (her 'waiting-woman') her feelings of boredom. As we shall see, Portia is a self-indulgent individual who has little better to do than wallow in her wealth and in a state of terminal ennui ('awearied of this great world').

Portia is a rich heiress; her inherited fortune may not make her happy, but it enables her to be miserable in plush comfort. She is a lady of leisure; she lives a life of luxurious ease, hardly knowing that she has been born. This life of luxury she shares with Nerissa (her maid) with whom she idles away her time, gossiping about possible suitors for her hand.

The function of Scene 2 is also to expose the plot of the play: namely, that Portia's hand in marriage can be won only by the suitor who passes the Casket Test. But there is in this scene also an exposition of the theme of the play: namely, that it is difficult for flawed human beings to behave with moral consistency: 'to be seated in the mean'. Consequently, Nerissa's even statement –

It is no mean happiness, therefore, to be seated in the mean

– is not idle girl-talk as it might sound, but a statement of Shakespeare’s central concern. Because we live ‘in a naughty world’, we tend to behave naughtily/hypocritically: “It is a good divine that follows his own instructions.” At the outset, Portia is aware that it is difficult to practise what one preaches/that it is difficult always to be ‘good’. For this reason, her subsequent sigh – “O me the word ‘choose’” – appears to refer to her choice of a husband, but in reality refers to moral choice itself: what can she do to ensure that she lives a ‘good’ life? For the benefit of the audience, Nerissa explains that Portia’s late father has devised a ‘lottery’ in which the suitors for her hand must make a choice between ‘these three chests of gold, silver and lead’. This choice becomes an emblem of the moral choices which lie at the heart of the play.

With Nerissa, Portia names and describes the ‘princely suitors’ who have arrived at Belmont. Their attitudes to these foreign suitors/strangers/outsideers are not so much satirical as hostile; they are xenophobic, even racist. The list of Portia’s potential husbands is cosmopolitan: a Neapolitan prince, a French lord, an English baron, a Scottish lord and a German duke’s nephew. Each is mentioned simply so that Portia can find fault with him; none of the aristocrats in this ‘parcel of wooers’ is good enough for her simply because he is foreign. It is only when Nerissa mentions a fellow Italian (‘a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier’) that Portia’s eyes light up and she takes an active interest: “I remember him well”.

At the end of the scene, a serving-man brings news that a seventh suitor (the Prince of Morocco) is on his way to Belmont. Of Morocco, Portia has the same racist preconception: even if he were a saint, Portia would not want to marry him because he is black [= has the ‘complexion of a devil’].

ACT I Scene 3

The character of Shylock is responsible for the greatest of all insights into Shakespearean characterisation. John Middleton Murry’s essay entitled *Shakespeare’s Method* was written in 1936:

Shylock is both the embodiment of an irrational hatred and a credible human being; he is neither of these things to the exclusion of the other ... The situation was given; necessarily, therefore, the ‘characters’ in a certain primitive sense – much the same sense in which we can speak of ‘characters’ in a nursery-story like Cinderella or Robin Hood or a Punch and Judy show. They are simply the necessary agents for that situation or that story. Shakespeare proceeded to endow them with poetic utterance and with character in a quite different sense: he did what he could to make them credible human beings to himself; he gave them, so far as was possible, humanly plausible motives for their acts and situations, although these were often in fact prior to humane psychology. In a word, the method of Shakespeare’s drama consists essentially in the humanisation of melodrama.

In 1904, A. C. Bradley’s essays had famously treated Shakespeare’s plays as if they were to be accessed primarily through a forensic analysis of their central characters. It was this approach that Middleton Murry resisted – though not, it has to be said, to widespread acclaim. Although Murry’s caveat against an over-reliance on Bradley’s approach was issued in 1936, O-Level, GCSE and A-Level teachers in post-War education have not been eager to heed it. How often have we seen examination questions (at all Levels) which treat a central character as if he/she – and not the play – is the thing?

What John Middleton Murry does is make a clear distinction: between function/role and character. His argument is that Shakespeare’s characters are *not* primarily of interest for the psychological realism with which they are portrayed; in his view, they are primarily of interest for their functions in the plot and/or their roles in the dramatic enactment of an idea. Put another way, Shakespeare’s characters [= “the ‘characters’ in a certain primitive sense”] are

there not to give passing impersonations of real people, but to give shape to an idea; his characters, GCSE teachers please note, are subservient to the dramatic pattern and "are simply the necessary agents for that situation or that story".

It will, of course, be noticed that, in making his case, Middleton Murry was inattentive to his own use of language, for that adverb – "*simply* the necessary agents" – is careless, ignoring (as it ironically does) the dazzling perception that he then proceeds to record. Why was it possible for A. C. Bradley (who'd died only a year earlier) to misplace the emphasis in his Shakespearean criticism? Sensitive to this question, Middleton Murry answers in full ... Shakespeare's characters are *not* "simply the necessary agents" for his plots. No, Shakespeare (whoever he was) proceeded to endow his characters with "character in a quite different sense": that is, he *did* endow them with a psychological realism. What did Shakespeare do with these agents? In addition to endowing them with a function in the shaping of the plot/of the dramatic idea, "he did what he could to make them *credible human beings to himself*" and "gave them, so far as was possible, *humanly plausible motives* for their acts and situations." By my italics, I seek to stress that Shakespeare "did what he could" to bring pale personifications alive. "So far as was possible", he brought stock representations of good and evil/virtue and vice to life.

At one level, Shylock and Don John (in ***Much Ado***) are "the embodiments of an irrational hatred" – the baddies over whom the good guys prevail, the pantomime villains set up 'simply' for the purpose of allowing the heroes to triumph over them. At another level, a height that pantomime makes no attempt to scale, each is "a credible human being". In a tragedy, Don John would become Iago.

Like Antonio, Shylock is a merchant of Venice; it can equally be argued that he is 'the merchant' of Shakespeare's title. Indeed, our first impression of him is of a calculating businessman ("Well ...") who is carefully weighing up the pros and cons of Bassanio's proposition.

Bassanio (who is trying to discover what Antonio's credit 'can in Venice do') is eager to persuade Shylock that Antonio is a sound investment, a safe bet; his haste to do a deal is almost indecent. After all, Shylock ("Three thousand ducats for three months, and Antonio bound") hesitates before clinching the deal precisely because Antonio's means are 'in supposition'; he, if not Bassanio, is sensitive that Antonio's ships could be pirated or even sink. Only after assessing the risk of lending 'three thousand ducats' does Shylock think that he may take Antonio's bond.

Bassanio ("Be assured you may") is so eager to serve his own ends that he urges Shylock to make this unsecured loan. Shylock, still rightly cautious, asks to speak personally with Antonio. At this point, Bassanio behaves in a racist manner when he makes Shylock an offer ("If it please you to dine with us") which Shylock cannot help but refuse: being Jewish, Shylock 'will not eat' with the Christians because they eat pork which is not kosher.

Upon Antonio's entrance, Shylock turns 'aside' and speaks a soliloquy in which he shares with the audience his private thoughts; here is Shylock thinking aloud and letting us know what motivates him. Shylock is telling us straight that he hates Antonio 'for he is a Christian': that is, he hates him first of all on principle/on racist grounds. But secondly, Shylock hates Antonio for a more practical reason: namely, that

He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

In addition to an innate pathological hatred, Shylock holds a particular grudge against Antonio: namely, that 'he lends out money gratis' [that is, without charging interest] and in this way is responsible for lowering 'the rate' [= interest rate] at which Shylock is able to do

business. As well as an 'ancient grudge', Shylock has a more modern grudge: that Antonio, by his generosity, poses a threat to the trade [= usury] by which the Jewish merchant makes his living. For these two reasons, Shylock – as he tells the audience – is determined to take any opportunity which presents itself to pay Antonio back for the wrongs which Christians have done to Jews. He will get mad *and* he will get even; revenge – both for Antonio's original hatred of his 'sacred nation' and for his sharp business-practice – is a matter of tribal honour with Shylock. As we watch the action unfold, we have been warned.

This very opportunity for Shylock's revenge immediately presents itself. Even though he 'cannot instantly raise up the gross of full three thousand ducats', he is prepared to borrow it (from Tubal) rather than let this opportunity pass him by. Consequently, Shylock's greeting to Antonio – "Rest you fair, good signor!" – illustrates clearly that Shylock has two faces: that (as Antonio will shortly say) he is 'a villain with a smiling cheek'. He is a pernicious hypocrite whose 'falsehood' hath a 'goodly outside'.

Antonio's first words to Shylock ("I neither lend nor borrow ...") remind us of his powerful affection for Bassanio; he explains that he does not normally borrow money, but that he is making an exception in this case where Bassanio is concerned. In other words, he is borrowing not for himself, but for his friend.

At this point, Shylock embarks upon a scriptural defence of 'interest'. Being Jewish, he is well versed in the Old Testament and cites the story of Jacob's sheep to show that 'interest' (in this case, cross-breeding) is a perfectly natural arrangement: indeed, it is a blessing. Antonio reacts indignantly to Shylock's use of the Bible ('scripture') in order to justify an immoral practice; in Antonio's eyes, this analogy is an example of Shylock's cunning, an indication of his capacity for deception ('a goodly apple rotten at the heart').

Shylock continues to tantalise Antonio and Bassanio, repeating the proposed terms of the bond as if he cannot quite make up his mind. When Antonio finally loses his temper ("Well, Shylock ...") and demands an answer, Shylock embarks upon a rhetorical exposure of Antonio's flagrant hypocrisy. Shylock rounds on him ("Signor Antonio ...") and reminds him that they share a history in which Antonio has seized every opportunity to criticise him for practising usury ('my usances'). Shylock reminds Antonio that he has taken this criticism with a stoical resignation ('a patient shrug') even though many of the epithets hurled at him ('cut-throat dog') have been extremely vituperative. Shylock would not have minded this abuse so much if Antonio had not been speaking completely out of turn: that is, castigating Shylock for simply minding his own business/his 'well-won thrift'. For this reason, Shylock considers it extremely ironic that Antonio should now be asking him of all people for a loan.

If we listen carefully to the rises and falls of Shylock's voice, then we will hear in these cadences his scorn for Antonio's inconsistent behaviour. In fact, he enjoys dramatising the preposterous situation in which Antonio finds himself: you – 'who spat on me on Wednesday last', who kicked me like a dog – now want me to do you a favour! In effect, he is asking Antonio how he has the nerve to ask him for 'moneys'. His supreme trick is to ask Antonio to put himself in a Jew's position:

Hath a dog money? Is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?

With glee, Shylock throws Antonio's words back in his face, rubs his nose in the racist dirt of his anti-Semitism. He relishes confronting Antonio with the inconsistency of his logic: if Jews are 'dogs', then why is he stooping so low as to ask them for help?

The final movement of Shylock's speech is a further parody of Antonio's hypocritical position. Once more, Shylock dramatises the answer which he ought rightly to give to Antonio's request and in so doing scoffs at the Christian's effrontery:

and for these courtesies
I'll lend you thus much moneys?

Shylock's ironic use of 'courtesies' and his accents upon the personal pronouns (I, you) convey his incredulity at Antonio's bare-faced cheek. The emphasis of the last line – rising to a point of high dudgeon – derides Antonio for thinking that he could get away with such a thing. "How very dare you?" Shylock seems to be saying; he is left gasping in disbelief.

Humiliated by the accuracy of Shylock's logic, Antonio turns nasty. Riled, he makes a reckless suggestion and becomes the author of his own misfortune: if you can't lend this money to me as a friend, then 'lend it rather to thine enemy' from whom you may more comfortably 'exact the penalty' if he reneges. Shylock seizes his opportunity coolly; here, all of a sudden, is his chance to 'catch' Antonio 'upon the hip' and 'feed fat the ancient grudge' which he bears him. Shylock ("Why look you, how you storm!") has Antonio at his mercy and pretends that there is no need for such an irate reaction. He is being disingenuous, for it is vital to remember that Shylock has both a religious and an economic grudge against Antonio and to see his forthcoming offer in this context. Given that Shylock hates Antonio because he is both a Christian and a rival merchant, we know that the 'merry sport' will be neither 'merry' nor a 'sport'. Shylock's proposal – that Antonio forfeit 'an equal pound' of his 'fair flesh' – is made in deadly earnest. Antonio ("Content, in faith") agrees swiftly to the bond because he has just been outwitted by Shylock in argument and does not wish to suffer yet another reverse; equally swiftly, Bassanio sees the danger ("You shall not seal ...") but Antonio exhibits hubris: complacently, he assumes that his ships will return safely 'within these two months'.

Shylock continues to be wickedly disingenuous when he implies a criticism of these Christians for suspecting 'the thoughts of others'. "What should I gain?" he asks them: after all, 'a pound of man's flesh' is not worth anything; it isn't even as 'profitable' as mutton or beef. Shylock, however, has made his calculations. He knows that 'ships are but boards' vulnerable to the 'peril of waters, winds and rocks' and is banking on the failure of Antonio's ventures to bring about a situation in which he can legally cut out his heart.

Shylock, then, is not a stereotypical Jew; he has psychological realism. Because he has suffered racist persecution, been victimised by the Christians, he has a simple motive for his conduct: revenge. When he 'seals unto this bond', Antonio compromises himself: he takes part not in a 'merry sport', but in a dangerous transaction. It is worth reiterating that this deal is neither 'merry' nor a 'sport'. When he recycles this phrase, Shylock ('merry bond') is using an oxymoron: how can a 'bond' which legalises murder ever be said to be 'merry'?

Antonio ends the scene in high spirits, for he is optimistic about his prospects of repaying Shylock's money 'a month before the day'. His certainty that there 'can be no dismay' smacks of hubristic over-confidence and alerts an audience to the nemesis which surely awaits him ...

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ACT II Scene 1

We return to Belmont where Portia is receiving her next suitor, the Prince of Morocco. It is significant that Morocco refers repeatedly to his swarthy complexion because he is concerned that Portia will 'mislike' him for being black. He is at pains to reassure her that 'this aspect of mine' is nothing to fear: indeed, 'the best-regarded virgins' in Morocco have found him very attractive ... So there!

From his preoccupation with his colour, his 'hue', it is clear that Morocco is worried about a racist reception. Even so, Morocco is resolved to submit himself to the Casket Test; he is prepared to play the 'lottery' and risk forfeiting forever his right 'to speak to lady afterward in

way of marriage'. Although Morocco – with his boastful nature – appears to be a comic character, he deserves Portia's respect (and ours) for being brave/'valiant' enough to try to overcome the 'hazard' that the Casket Test presents.

ACT II Scene 2

Launcelot Gobbo is the 'unthrifty knave' who works for Shylock at his house in the Jewish ghetto of Venice. At the start of the play, he is Shylock's servant whose apparent purpose is to supply comic relief. Because he is a low-life character, Launcelot speaks prose; but, if we listen carefully to his reasoned arguments with himself, we shall hear that this rascal is in a serious moral quandary. Although he may deliver his lines at a hectic pace and enact his difficulties with imagination, his soliloquy is designed both to entertain and instruct. For he is in a major dilemma: he cannot decide whether or not to quit Shylock's service and go to work for Bassanio. Should he be loyal to 'this Jew my master' ('who is a kind of devil') or be disloyal and join Bassanio (a Christian)? For Launcelot, it would be no mean achievement ('no mean happiness') 'to be seated in the mean'; he is cursing the word 'choose'.

Because Launcelot Gobbo (by name, a hunchback) is a Christian, he feels guilty that he has been 'in the long-time service of a Jew'; because he has served Shylock for such a long time, he feels uneasy about leaving him for Bassanio – even though Bassanio is a fellow Christian. As a result, Launcelot's dilemma becomes an emblem of the dilemma which will face the major characters in the play. Like them, Launcelot is in two minds/unable to 'choose' (that 'word' again) between alternatives of equal value; like them, he is torn/perplexed by a moral choice between equally unattractive opposites. One might say that he is between the devil (Shylock) and – this is Venice – the deep blue sea!

In the end, Launcelot decides to leave Shylock's service and – although Bassanio is notoriously 'poor' – serve him instead. He indulges in an irrelevant sexual innuendo ("Eleven widows and nine maids is a simple coming in for one man") and goes off to kit himself out in the 'livery' of Bassanio's household.

Gratiano insists on accompanying Bassanio to Belmont. Bassanio tells him that he is 'too wild, too rude and bold of voice' to be a fitting companion upon such a delicate 'mission'; if Gratiano is going to travel to Belmont, then he is going to have to behave with more 'modesty' and keep control of his 'skipping spirit'. Faced with this ultimatum, Gratiano promises to 'put on a sober habit, talk with respect and ... look demurely': in short, he promises to brush up both his appearance and his etiquette. He will become the model of a genteel courtier and keep a civil tongue in his head ...

ACT II Scene 3

This is one of three scenes set at Shylock's house: here, we meet his daughter Jessica whose elopement with Lorenzo (a Christian) will be central to the development of the plot. Although Jessica is Jewish, she feels no loyalty to her father whose 'house is hell'; on the contrary, she is sad that Launcelot is leaving it because he ('a merry devil') was the only person who stopped it from being such an oppressive and tedious place to live.

At this point, Jessica makes the dramatic revelation that she is in love with Lorenzo, Bassanio's guest at supper. Immediately, it becomes clear that Lorenzo and Jessica – rather like Romeo and Juliet – are carrying on a clandestine affair, for she gives Launcelot a letter to deliver 'secretly'. Launcelot's terms of endearment ('most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew!') are oxymoronic and as such indicate Jessica's status in the Venetian world: that is, as an honorary Christian. Launcelot even goes so far as to say that Jessica, because she is so beautiful, must have been conceived by a Christian.

Jessica's soliloquy explains that she is 'ashamed' to be her father's child/ashamed to be Jewish. Consequently, she is determined to renounce her religion and marry Lorenzo ('become a Christian and thy loving wife').

ACT II Scene 4

Gratiano, Lorenzo, Salerio and Solanio are preparing for a lads' night out on the town; significantly, they are without Bassanio who is preparing to entertain Shylock at supper. Launcelot delivers to Lorenzo Jessica's letter in which she tells her Christian suitor that she is ready to elope with him; significantly, she is going to take Shylock's 'gold and jewels' with her.

Lorenzo echoes the racial prejudice towards Shylock which Launcelot had voiced in the previous scene; he explains that, if Shylock ever escapes damnation, then it will be only because he has begotten such a heavenly daughter. To Shylock, Lorenzo applies a significant epithet: 'a faithless Jew'. The accusation against Shylock throughout the play is that he lacks faith: both the Christian faith and the capacity to keep his word.

ACT II Scene 5

Here is the second of the three scenes in the play which are set in the Jewish ghetto. Shakespeare takes us into Shylock's 'sober house' and introduces us to 'the difference of old Shylock and Bassanio: the difference between the puritanical Jew and 'the prodigal Christian'. It is upon this alleged difference that the play relies for its conflict.

Shylock is in a cantankerous mood: adopting an aggressive stance ("I'll go in hate ...") to Christian hospitality, he reinforces the contemporary audience's resentment of Jewry. He is carrying on two conversations: first, he is warning Launcelot that he will regret leaving his service; second, he is calling for his daughter ("What, Jessica!") because he wants her to take care of the house while he is out at supper. There is dramatic irony at Shylock's expense because we know, whereas he does not, that Jessica is busy packing her bags with his 'gold and jewels'.

It is important to notice (what is often missed) that Shylock – who in Act I Scene 3 had refused to eat pork with the Christians – is preparing to dine with Bassanio after all: in other words, Shylock – who had previously refused in principle to eat with the Christians – has now compromised this principle in order to do business/make money.

Shylock's dream ("for I did dream of money-bags tonight") is another irony at his expense: while he is dreaming of losing his money-bags, Jessica is busy taking them. In this scene, Shylock does conform to the stereotypical image of an avaricious Jew: not only does he 'dream of money-bags', but he also expresses contempt for 'Christian fools with varnished faces'. Being a puritan, he has no time for a good time/no place for festivity or revelry in his life; he fears that such 'shallow foppery' will drift up from the street and give his daughter the wrong ideas. Such remarks reinforce our picture of Shylock as a mean-minded operator ('in thrifty mind') who is ready to spoil anybody's sport. If Shylock was mildly hypocritical in heading off to Bassanio's house for a business-supper, then he is flagrantly so in sneering at Bassanio for 'his borrowed purse': after all, he himself – remember – has borrowed the three thousand ducats from Tubal.

ACT II Scene 6

Here is the third scene set in the Jewish ghetto: to be precise, it is set on the street outside Shylock's house in which Jessica is planning her elopement: *Enter Jessica above in boy's clothes*. From her 'casement', she throws down the casket in which Shylock's 'gold and jewels' are packed and then – 'transformèd to a boy' – herself comes down 'straight' into Lorenzo's arms.

So impressed is Gratiano by Jessica's treachery that he too cannot believe that she is Jewish: 'a gentle and no Jew'. To him, she is an honorary Gentile.

Lorenzo is a cardboard character; as a lovelorn youth, he lacks individuality and can express his romantic feeling only conventionally: "but I love her heartily". He praises his beautiful Jewess for her capacity to keep her word: "and true she is, as she hath proved herself". It is this difficulty in keeping one's word/in remaining 'constant' which troubles both Christian and Jew throughout the play.

At the end of the scene, Antonio arrives to discover that there will be 'no masque tonight'; instead, Lorenzo and Jessica have eloped and Bassanio and Gratiano will 'presently' depart for Belmont – twenty miles up the Italian coast.

ACT II Scene 7 (The First Casket Scene)

It should be remembered that the Casket Scenes are emblems of the moral choices with which Shakespeare's characters are faced throughout the play.

The first function of the First Casket Scene is to acquaint us with the 'inscriptions' upon the three caskets of gold, silver and lead. The second function, of course, is to provide us with the dramatic spectacle of Morocco's choice itself.

Portia's first suitor, the Prince of Morocco, is usually portrayed as a figure of fun; a 'flourish of cornets' ensures that he arrives with a ceremonial pomp and anticipates his exhibition of hubris. On the strength of one line ("As much as I deserve") Morocco can indeed appear a boastful and pompous individual whose opinion of himself is too high; usually, productions invite us to laugh at a black man who has an inflated idea of his own importance. In holding up a Moor to ridicule, Shakespeare is simply pandering to the racial prejudice of his audience.

The Gold Casket reads: "Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire". The grounds on which he chooses it ("Why that's the lady") and rejects the others are entirely reasonable, paying (as they do) extravagant compliments to Portia – an object of veneration – whom he duly calls a 'mortal breathing saint'.

Morocco rejects the Lead Casket because it is 'base' and 'too gross' for Portia; he rejects the Silver Casket because it is less valuable than 'tried gold'; but he chooses the Gold Casket because he recalls an English coin 'that bears the figure of an angel stampèd in gold'. One argument runs that Morocco is no more than a materialist who, seduced by the likeness of a gold coin, is deservedly deceived by its appearance. But another argument goes that he does not deserve to fail the Casket Test: that the famous writing on the scroll – "All that glisters is not gold" – teaches him an unduly harsh lesson. In short, his hubris does not merit such a nemesis: after all, Portia is what 'many men desire' and his choice makes logical sense.

Of course, Portia, being racist, being interested only in her fellow Venetians, is delighted that the black prince fails. Her parting shot – "Let all of his complexion choose me so" – confirms her racism and puts her firmly in her moral place.

ACT II Scene 8

We return to the streets of Venice on which Salerio and Solanio (the two Christian gossips) are recounting events which have recently taken place there: first, Bassanio and Gratiano have left for Belmont; second, more significantly, Lorenzo has eloped with Shylock's 'amorous' daughter Jessica 'in a gondola'.

Salerio reports Shylock's first reaction to this elopement; apparently, he asked the Duke of Venice to search Bassanio's Belmont-bound ship for 'Lorenzo and his amorous Jessica';

second, according to Solanio, Shylock began to wail 'in the streets'. In order to illustrate Shylock's passion, Solanio gives a dramatic rendition of his performance; it is specifically designed to suggest that 'the villain Jew'/'the dog Jew' cannot decide which loss grieves him more: his daughter or his ducats. Solanio repeats this alliterative phrase in different formulations ("My daughter! O my ducats ... My ducats and my daughter") in order to imply that Shylock, being a 'villain'/'being a 'dog', cannot decide whether material value (his ducats) or spiritual worth (his 'own flesh and blood') is more important to him. It is this precise conflict within Shylock – between ducats and flesh – which will resurface in Act IV Scene 1.

Such a melodramatic enactment is designed to reinforce the stereotypical image of the Jew who is motivated more by money than by love. However, the epithets which Solanio has used for Shylock ('villain Jew', 'dog Jew') should warn us that Shylock's histrionic outbursts may never have occurred. Because he is a Christian, gossiping with a Christian, Solanio is unlikely to give a balanced account of Shylock's reaction; in fact, he is more likely to show a racist bias and ignore any cry of genuine grief. Shylock may never have uttered any such words; he may never in actual fact have become a laughing-stock among 'all the boys of Venice' who, according then to Salerio, are alleged to have followed him with their taunts.

Solanio makes a sombre comment upon this turn of events: now that Shylock's daughter has eloped with a Christian, he is even more likely to want some form of revenge. If Antonio's ships fail to return, then he had better watch out: "he shall pay for this".

Salerio recounts the scene of Bassanio's departure for Belmont: apparently, it was a touching scene (in both senses of the word) in which 'good Antonio' gave a further illustration of his superlative kindness and generosity; apparently, Antonio – in his altruistic way – told Bassanio not to hurry back, not to think about the 'Jew's bond' and not to have any second thoughts about him in his pursuit of Portia. It is clear from Solanio's report that it upset Antonio ('his eye being big with tears') to see Bassanio go; indeed, he could not look Bassanio in the face when he 'wrung' his hand. Solanio's comment – "I think he only loves the world for him" – seems to confirm that Antonio is in homosexual love with Bassanio.

ACT II Scene 9 (The Second Casket Scene)

The first function of the Second Casket Scene is to reinforce the audience's awareness of the Casket Test. Indeed, Arragon's speech does nothing more than run again through the 'three things' which Portia's father has decreed in his will. Portia's response to the Spanish Prince of Arragon is ironic at the expense of the Test: although she does not want him to succeed, she uses the word 'hazard'.

Like Morocco, Arragon is another character without character who can afford to fail the Casket Test: in fact, his role in the play is to do just that and enable the contemporary audience to jeer at a Spaniard. Like Morocco, Arragon enters to a 'flourish of cornets' which is again designed to accompany an exhibition of hubris: arrogantly, he rejects one of the caskets (the gold) because he does not wish to have 'what many men desire' and he exhibits further hubris when he refuses to align himself with 'the fool multitude that choose by show' – he will not 'jump with common spirits ... with the barbarous multitudes'. He prides himself on having recognised that 'all that glisters is not gold'.

Also like Morocco, Arragon makes his choice on reasonable grounds. He chooses the Silver Casket because he believes that each man should 'get as much as he deserves'. Aware that many men 'wear an undeserved dignity', he makes his choice on behalf of all those whose 'clear honour' does ensure them their just deserts: "I will assume desert". For this display of hubris, Arragon's nemesis is to discover that his chosen casket contains not a picture of Portia, but 'the portrait of a blinking idiot'. The suggestion is that Arragon is a 'blinking idiot' if he expects in this naughty world to 'get as much as he deserves ...'

In the Venetian world of the play, Destiny and Fortune operate blindly; they do not treat all men fairly. Does Shylock deserve his fate? Does Bassanio deserve Portia?

At the end of this scene, 'a young Venetian' arrives in Belmont to tell Portia that Bassanio is on his way, bringing with him 'gifts of rich value' – purchased, of course, with some of the three thousand ducats which Antonio has borrowed from Shylock.

* * * * *

ACT III Scene 1

Solanio and Salerio are gossip-mongers. At the start of this scene, they are engaged in further tittle-tattle; the 'news on the Rialto' is that Antonio 'hath a ship of rich lading wracked' on the Goodwin Sands. The word is that Antonio's ships have indeed miscarried as feared.

Consequently, upon Shylock's entrance, Solanio asks him whether he has heard the news of Antonio's lost ship. It is significant that Shylock is thinking not of Antonio's misfortune, but of his daughter's flight/of the rebellion against him of his 'own flesh and blood'. It is not until Salerio mentions Antonio that Antonio's misfortune comes to Shylock's mind: "there I have another bad match". Suddenly remembering that he is unlikely to recoup his three thousand ducats, he calls Antonio a 'bankrupt, a prodigal' and 'a beggar'. He is so worried about Jessica and so busy abusing Antonio that it does not at first register with him that he has here a golden [lead?] opportunity to catch the fawning publican 'upon the hip' and 'feed fat the ancient grudge' which he bears him. Consequently, he utters his first imperative ("Let him look to his bond") without menace/almost absent-mindedly. It is when he recalls the vast extent of Antonio's hypocrisy that he repeats the imperative as if he means it in deadly earnest. Here is a moment of dramatic revelation: as a result, his third imperative ("Let him look to his bond ...") expresses Shylock's absolute determination to extract his pound of flesh.

Salerio, thinking that an avaricious Jew cannot possibly be serious about claiming a worthless commodity, asks him what good it will do. This question is Shylock's cue for his supreme expression of the view that there is a common humanity which is always and everywhere the same and that racial prejudice has no place in a moral world.

Shylock's speech is remarkable for its rhetorical power/for the systematic organisation of its language. His argument – that no man is superior to another and that Christian and Jew are therefore commensurate in dignity – goes through three phases which require subtle variations of an actor's tone and exquisite modulations of his pace. In each case, a series of syntactical parallelisms leads up to a climax; in each case, Shylock asks himself a number of rhetorical questions which invite devastating answers: "... and what's his reason? I am a Jew". In this first phase, Shylock answers his own question in an incredulous tone: though he himself hates Antonio 'for he is a Christian', he affects astonishment that any man can regard and treat a fellow man so badly simply on account of their racial difference. Shylock, so Shylock argues, is no less a human being for being Jewish.

In the second phase – "Hath not a Jew eyes?" – Shylock states a number of obviouses which cannot fail to effect a comparison/establish a fundamental likeness between the races. Shylock is attempting to take up a position of moral impregnability. He is pointing at the double standard by which Christians judge men and seeking to replace it with a single standard: "If you prick us, do we not bleed ..?" In the third phase, Shylock's rhetoric soars off with irrefutable logic towards his conclusion: that, "if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" This time, Shylock's proverb should be: "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander." If I act 'by Christian example', then – so Shylock argues – I shall exact my revenge; in this respect,

he will simply 'resemble' a Christian. If such a reaction constitutes 'villainy', then – ironically – it is nothing other than the very villainy which the Christians have taught him.

At this stage in the play – when Antonio's Man enters – Shylock is left in occupation of the moral high ground: indeed, Shakespeare times the Man's entrance to give the impression that Shylock has just had the last word on the matter.

But Shakespeare's presentation of Shylock is never other than complicated. In the second half of this scene, Shylock expresses 'a passion so confused, so strange, outrageous and so variable' that it is difficult to reach an opinion of him. In his exchange with his fellow Jew, Tubal, he reacts to the two recent events in his life with conflicting emotions. It transpires that Shylock has paid Tubal to search for Jessica: when Tubal (as here) duly returns from Genoa with news of Jessica's exploits, he fills her father with anguish/emotional pain. Never until now – so Shylock exclaims – did 'the curse' which is said to afflict the Jewish nation fall upon him personally. As a result, he wishes that his daughter 'were dead at [his] foot and the jewels in her ear'. He feels so badly betrayed by her that he wishes she were dead and that the stolen jewels and ducats were 'in her coffin with her': in other words, Shylock – in his personal grief – has gone past caring about the money that he has lost.

Tubal tries to staunch Shylock's flow of grief by reminding him that Antonio has lost an 'argosy' en route from Tripolis ... This other information lifts Shylock's spirits and fills him with elation/emotional joy.

But the exchanges between Shylock and Tubal are not straightforward. Seeking confirmation that Tubal has heard news of Antonio's 'ill-luck in Genoa', Shylock inadvertently reminds Tubal of Jessica's exploits in that city. Either deliberately or tactlessly, Tubal tells Shylock of Jessica's Christian profligacy ('one night, fourscore ducats') and instantly re-ignites Shylock's anguish. Quickly correcting himself, Tubal talks again of Antonio and restores a rapacious glint to Shylock's eye ("I'll torture him").

Unaccountably this time, Tubal changes the subject to Jessica again: apparently, she has bartered a ring for 'a monkey'. At this point, Shylock becomes totally distraught because the spiritual value of this 'turquoise' ring ("I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor") far outweighs its material worth: in other words, the ring which his late wife Leah gave to him before they were married is of such sentimental value that it is worth more to him than anything else in the world. So much, then, for the avaricious Jew – **and for Bassanio, the Christian, who in Act IV Scene 2 gives away his fiancée's ring ...**

At the end of this scene, Shylock heads off 'to the synagogue' where before God he makes a vow to have Antonio's heart if he fails to keep his bond. Shylock's oath ("meet me at our synagogue") will have serious implications for his conduct in Act IV Scene I [Line 225]. At the synagogue, Shylock obtains religious approval for his hard line of action – which explains why in Act IV Scene I he cannot strain the quality of mercy ... not unless he wishes to condemn himself to eternal damnation, that is.

ACT III Scene 2 (The Third Casket Scene)

As Shylock consecrates his hatred of Antonio, so Bassanio – on Antonio's money – arrives in Belmont to play for Portia's hand in marriage.

The drift of Portia's address ("I would not lose you ..."/"I would not detain you ...") signals explicitly to Bassanio that he is her preferred choice of husband; in short, he has been elected: "One half of me is yours, the other half yours ..." Furthermore, Portia's vocabulary

(‘hazard’, ‘venture’) sets out – against her declared purpose – to ‘teach’ him ‘how to choose right’; it drops hints, gives shameless clues.

When Bassanio (“I live upon the rack ...”) expresses his impatience to take the Casket Test, Portia's responses are notable for their proleptic ironies: she bids him ‘confess what treason there is mingled’ with his love, for ‘upon the rack ... men enforced do speak anything.’ Precisely: remember that Bassanio is a mercenary opportunist who has been willing to exploit his friend in order to promote his own interests; he is an idle, shallow thing who in Act IV will part treacherously with his betrothal-ring and in Act V does ‘speak anything’ in his frantic efforts to mitigate this offence and keep hold of his winnings. In this context, Portia’s confidence –

If you do love me, you will find me out

– must be seen as conforming to the conventions of the fairy-tale world of Belmont; she simply makes believe that an inherent goodness – rather than a gambler’s instinct – will usher her favoured suitor to his election. In this never-never land, it is inevitable that Prince Charming will pick the right casket/that Jason will win the Golden Fleece.

Portia’s next speech (“Let music sound ...”) expresses an equally idealistic confidence that the ‘dulcet sounds’ of music will bring Bassanio’s consideration of the caskets to a harmonious conclusion. The reality is that the song sung ‘whilst Bassanio comments on the caskets to himself’ –

Tell me where is Fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourishèd?

– relies for its effect upon give-away monosyllables which rhyme plangently with ‘lead’. Given that Portia and Nerissa have known all along what ‘the contrary caskets’ are, some Directors have not hesitated to position the two actors/actresses beside the lead casket where they can even point at it when the rhymes are sounded. The song even gives Bassanio a clue to the sentiments which he ought to express when he comes to voice the reasons for his choice. All that glisters is not gold ... Likewise, Fancy ‘is engendered in the eyes ...’ Indeed, Bassanio’s first words –

So may the outward shows be least themselves.
The world is still deceived with ornament

– reveal that he has taken this hint and is arguing his way logically towards the ‘meagre lead’. This passage is misleading if it suggests that Bassanio, in preferring ‘meagre lead’, is a good guy because he is not deceived by gaudy appearances [= ‘outward shows’/‘ornament’] and so deserves to win Belmont’s Lottery. If Bassanio knows ‘the seeming truth’ when he sees it, this may be because he is a slick operator who has learned from experience not to judge a book by its cover. Because the Lead Casket offers more of a ‘threat’ than a ‘promise’, the perverse calculator of odds, the rash speculator, the prodigal archer, goes for it.

Portia is duly overwhelmed by her passionate longing for this reckless gambler; she is ecstatic that an end to her celibacy/her sexual frustration is imminent. In this land of make-believe, it is apt that Bassanio, upon opening the Lead Casket, should be confronted by a picture of a ‘demigod’ [= “Fair Portia’s counterfeit”] and that he should be congratulated by the scroll for having refused to ‘choose ... by the view’. At first, Bassanio will claim her ‘with a loving kiss’ in idealistic and sentimental accord with the ‘gentle scroll’ ... Some Directors will then stage his eagerness ‘to give and to receive’ second and third kisses in which both his physical desire for Portia and hers for him become explicit.

Portia's acceptance-speech ("You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand ...") pays lip-service to the Renaissance concept of womanhood: by this fairy-tale lore, she is a 'thrice-fair lady' in that the three graces of classical femininity – beauty, chastity and passion – are perfectly balanced/harmoniously combined in her. As a result, she presents herself to Bassanio ("for myself I would not be ambitious") in accordance with this formula: 'fair', 'an unlesioned girl, unschooled, unpractisèd' and 'happy' to give herself ('this same myself') entirely to him. Such a modest self-appraisal will appeal to conventional interpreters of Portia's role who wish to emphasise her demure character; by contrast, a lewd interpreter will want to highlight her seductive use of vocabulary in which financial terms ('more rich', 'high in your account', 'exceed account', 'the full sum of me', 'sum of something', 'in gross') proliferate x 6 and offer Bassanio ('her lord' and master) total control of her estate ('this fair mansion'). Queen of herself no longer, Portia could not be keener to please 'her king' and she rewards him in good faith with a token of her complete trust in him:

I give them with this ring,
Which when you part from, lose or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.

'Giddy in spirits', Bassanio reciprocates:

But when this ring
Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence,
O then be bold to say Bassanio's dead.

This verbal contract/sworn commitment is of supreme structural importance to the play. Bassanio could not have made a more solemn declaration, given a more solemn promise – for his moral worth, his fitness for the regal role which Portia has assigned to him, is to depend in the end upon his capacity to keep it no matter what the circumstances are. Of course, it is from this point – from these 'oaths of love' – that Shakespeare will pick up the narrative after Shylock's exit in Act IV Scene 1 and thereby convict both Bassanio and Gratiano of bad faith. For Gratiano has simultaneously been 'in quest' of Nerissa and has succeeded likewise: "My eyes, my lord, can look as swift as yours." Portia's response to this additional turn of events – "Is this true, Nerissa?" – is either a reprimand or an indignant admonishment that creates humour in the theatre; either way, it indicates how little she likes to listen to the sound of stolen thunder. Demi-divine though she may appear, Portia [cf. III.4 and V.1] is also a self-centred little minx. Bassanio's response – "And do you, Gratiano, mean good faith" – is richly ironic because both Christian husbands are moral scoundrels; indeed, they begin with their very next breaths ("We'll play with them ...") to bet crudely upon which wife – Portia or Nerissa – will be the first to give birth to a boy.

The mood in Shakespeare's comedies changes with a cloud-like frequency: throughout these plays, all things bright and beautiful live under constant threat from a dark and ugly spirit. Dramatic reversals of fortune [= instances of *peripeteia*] are common. As here ... No sooner have Bassanio and Gratiano begun to enjoy the thought of the good life than Lorenzo and Jessica (still 'his infidel') arrive in Belmont, accompanied by Salerio who in a letter brings 'news from Venice' that Antonio's ships and Antonio ('that royal merchant') are both in dire straits. Bassanio – extending his earlier metaphor of the arrow – cannot believe that 'not one' of Antonio's ships has 'hit' its target-port of Venice.

Salerio begins to reconstruct the case against Shylock. It transpires that, even if Antonio could repay the debt, 'the Jew' would not now accept it because he – inhuman 'creature' that he is – has subsequently [= following Jessica's elopement] decided that he would prefer to take Antonio's life; to this end, 'he plies the Duke at morning and at night' for 'justice', threatening – if he is not granted it – to ruin the reputation of Venice as an international trading-centre. Once more, the hostile epithets begin to pile up: so 'keen and greedy' is Shylock that 'none [as we shall see] can drive him from his envious plea'.

In this scene, Jessica's function is as an honorary Christian who – with her inside knowledge of the Jewish ghetto – can reinforce the case against Shylock: that is, testify first-hand to her father's hard-heartedness and intractability. She says that she has 'heard him swear' to Tubal and to another 'countryman' Chus that he 'would rather have Antonio's flesh' than any amount of money. In fact, Jessica's testimony tells us only about her own need to ingratiate herself with her new friends, for, on this detail, it must be false because of course Shylock ("Let him look to his bond") did not have cause to swear such precise vengeance until *after* Jessica herself had eloped; indeed, it was her very elopement that led directly to his oath. No wonder, then, that she is anxious to show solidarity rather than appear implicated ...

Bassanio ('the dearest friend to me, the kindest man') pays tribute to Antonio's compassionate character. Considering both the extent of Antonio's altruism and his own readiness to take advantage of it, such epithets are ironic at Bassanio's expense; now that Antonio's life is in jeopardy, even such superlatives put mildly Bassanio's vast indebtedness to him. "The best-conditioned and unwearied spirit in doing courtesies ..."? He can say that again! Portia's plan is to use her immense wealth to discharge Antonio from bankruptcy and thereby free him from Shylock's legal grip: if necessary, she is ready to pay out six thousand, twelve thousand, thirty-six thousand or sixty thousand ducats [= £14,500] to secure Antonio's safety. Her idea is 'first' to organise a double-wedding and then to despatch Bassanio and Gratiano to Venice without further ado; "my maid Nerissa and myself will meantime live as maids ..." Imagine the dismayed looks on the faces of Bassanio and Gratiano (not to mention Nerissa!) as Portia decides their priorities for them and it dawns on them that they must wait for the joyful consequences of choosing the right casket: that is, postpone the consummations of their marriages.

The scene concludes with Bassanio's public reading of Antonio's letter. Once more, Antonio selflessly refuses to blame Bassanio for having placed him in his grave predicament and signals that Bassanio can consider 'all debts' between them 'cleared' if he will simply be present at his death. These sentiments polish/buff up Antonio's Christ-like qualities; in particular, his lack of self-concern is calculated to supply an ethical standard by which not only 'the Jew' but also 'the Christian husbands' are to be judged.

ACT III Scene 3

Short though this scene is, it is effective in reinforcing the dramatic conflict between Jewish hard-heartedness (Shylock) and Christian fair-mindedness (Antonio). It is an emotive scene in that it presents a stage of Antonio's journey to a Debtors' Prison where he will await his trial; in this respect, it is not unlike a stage of Christ's journey to Calvary with his cross. Antonio, manacled and dishevelled, is being dragged through the Venetian streets by his Gaoler; for 'a royal merchant', such a progress makes a humiliating spectacle.

In this scene, Shylock ("Tell me not of mercy") is an embodiment of mercilessness: now that he has 'sworn an oath', he becomes intolerant of moral blandishments and intransigent. As a Jew, he is not likely to have much of a conception of Christian mercy, but is nevertheless vilified for his tyrannical insistence on his bond: "I'll have my bond!" Indeed, he conforms to the Christian stereotype of a Jew whose intractable will is at odds with common humanity:

Thou call'st me dog before thou hadst a cause,
But since I am a dog, beware my fangs.

Shylock is ready to play up to the Christians' inhuman image of him in order to show them what damage their repeated insults have done. Not without 'a cause', he blames his Christian abusers for his canine hunger/his unbending rigidity/his intransigence: in effect, he explains to them that they are about to be hoist with their own petard.

In this scene, there are no fewer than five occasions on which Shylock rants and raves that he will have his bond; he sounds like a monomaniac who cannot contain his vengeful spite. Shylock – “I’ll have my bond. I will not hear thee speak” – is in no mood to compromise or even listen to Antonio’s desperate entreaties. Because it is stricter than Christianity, Judaism prides itself on its code. Shylock (“I’ll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool ...”) considers that such pleas for clemency are signs of moral complacency. Consequently, he is suspicious of attempts to soften his hard line of approach and persuade him to ‘yield’ up the advantages which his superior self-discipline has won for him: in short, he will not be so weak as to give in to either emotional or moral blackmail. On this ground, Shylock articulates his contempt for the ‘Christian intercessors’ with whom he has finally lost all patience.

Upon Shylock’s exit, Solanio hurls after him another epithet of abuse (‘the most impenetrable cur’) which accuses him of being the lowest form of animal life and thereby makes his point for him. Both Shylock’s relentless insistence on his bond and Solanio’s vicious reaction to it promptly supply the context in Antonio can then exhibit the Christ-like qualities which they lack. Under these extreme circumstances, Antonio’s readiness to see the other man’s point of view (“His reason well I know”) is evidence of saintliness; in addition, he recognises that Shylock’s hatred of him is due not only to racial bias, but also to commercial rivalry (“I oft delivered from his forfeitures ...”) Furthermore, Antonio appreciates freely why the Duke of Venice can do nothing to help him. Because Venice (a cosmopolitan port) relies for its ‘profit’ upon the traffic ‘of all nations’, it cannot afford to treat ‘strangers’ differently under its law; lest it endanger its own healthy prosperity, it cannot be seen to discriminate between its own merchants and foreign traders. As a result, the Duke will have no choice but to grant the Jew’s legal right to a pound of Antonio’s flesh: ‘bloody creditor’ or not, Shylock is asking for no more than ‘the justice of the state’.

Antonio’s final sentence of the scene inspires further pathos for him: resigned to his ‘bloody’ fate, he prays only that Bassanio (now betrothed to a woman) will come to see him ‘pay his debt’: that is, the debt [= his death] which he incurred on Bassanio’s behalf and out of love for him.

ACT III Scene 4

The function of this scene is to combine the two plots. At the start of the scene, Shakespeare puts into Lorenzo’s mouth words that first endow Portia with the characteristics of a superhuman friend (‘a godlike amity’) and second put into her head the idea that she might do something in that guise to help Bassanio’s friend, Antonio. If she did indeed know ‘how dear a lover of my lord your husband’ Antonio is, then she might not be so keen to become a *dea ex machina* ..!

Portia’s response to Lorenzo’s compliments (“I never did repent for doing good”) tallies with her moral smugness in Act I Scene 2 and in Act V Scene 1. It has to be admitted that Portia can be played as a spoiled little madam who has a very high opinion of her value to the world; here, she is a goody-goody who is not averse to self-congratulation and is suddenly embarrassed by it: “This comes too near the praising of myself.”

At this point, Portia hatches the plan that joins the Belmont-plot and the Venice-plot together; to Nerissa’s astonishment and indignation, she is leaving her household in Lorenzo’s charge while she and Nerissa supposedly retire to ‘a monastery two miles off’ to await their husbands’ return. Just as soon as Lorenzo and Jessica are out of earshot, Portia tells her servant – significantly, named Balthasar – to travel to Padua and bring from her cousin Doctor Bellario ‘notes and garments’ which will do what they can to make this sudden development of the plot seem plausible. Balthasar is to bring these things ‘unto the traject’ [= the Belmont jetty] from which ‘the common ferry ... trades to Venice’.

At the end, Portia announces her sudden decision that she and Nerissa [to the greater comfort of the boy-actors in the original roles] are to change into trans-sexual disguises

(‘accoutred like young men’) and head for Venice in the persons of a lawyer and her clerk. It is upon this ironic ‘device’ that Act IV Scene 1 (the Court Scene) will rely for one layer of its dramatic effectiveness.

ACT III Scene 5

The function of this scene is primarily to permit time to pass between Portia and Nerissa’s departure from Belmont in Act III Scene 4 and their arrival in Venice in Act IV Scene 1. In the scene itself, Shakespeare’s characters parade a series of racial/racist attitudes; in each case, their views are coloured by a topical bias. For instance, the dialogue between Launcelot and Jessica (last seen in affectionate togetherness before both left Shylock’s house in the Jewish ghetto of Venice) is designed to supply Shakespeare’s racist audience with anti-Semitic entertainment. Launcelot is teasing Jessica, telling her that, although she may have married into the Christian faith, she is still ‘damned’ because she is still an infidel’s daughter; in Launcelot’s view, her only hope of salvation is ‘a kind of bastard hope’ that Leah was unfaithful to Shylock and became pregnant with her by a Christian.

Launcelot rebukes Lorenzo for his marriage to Jessica on the grounds that it threatens the common wealth of Christians, ‘for in converting Jews to Christians you raise the price of pork’: ie. the more people who eat pork, the scarcer and the dearer that meat will become. Lorenzo retaliates that Launcelot has no room to talk: because Launcelot has apparently got a Moorish woman ‘with child’, he has done more harm to the racial purity of the Venetian commonwealth than Lorenzo has. When Launcelot retorts with an unkind joke (‘took her for’) about the black woman’s morals, Lorenzo merely marvels that the fool ‘can play upon the word’ and confirms ‘what a wit-snapper’ his fellow racist is.

Upon Launcelot’s exit, Lorenzo asks Jessica what she thinks of Bassanio’s wife; it is difficult not to think that he is putting her through her paces, testing her affinity for her adopted race and ultimately her own fitness for his wife. To this test, Jessica proves equal: at once, she launches upon a complicated eulogy of Portia for whose peerless qualities (‘for the poor rude world/Hath not her fellow’) heaven – it seems – can hardly wait. If this testimony sounds like an over-lavish tribute to Portia’s dubious perfections, then we would do well to ask ourselves what else Jessica – in the alien territory of Portia’s Belmont – could safely have said ... In short, she tells her Christian husband what he wants to hear.

* * * * *

ACT IV Scene 1

The Court Scene is set in the Duke of Venice’s palace. It is important to note that the court is a public place: for this reason, Shakespeare’s stage-direction includes the ‘magnificoes’ (ie. all the important dignitaries of the Venetian state) and thereby signals his intention to endow this confrontation between Christian and Jew with a grand sense of occasion.

Before Shylock’s entrance, the Duke of Venice – being a Christian – endorses the view that Shylock is ‘an inhuman wretch’ who is ‘incapable’ of showing either ‘pity’ or ‘mercy’. For his part, Antonio is a model of Christian fair-mindedness: without complaint, he accepts that the Jew has every legal right to pursue his ‘rigorous course’ and is fully entitled to stand ‘obdurate’. Indeed, Antonio is patiently resigned to his fate and prepared to meet it with ‘a quietness of spirit’/with Christian humility.

Upon Shylock's entrance, the Duke adopts a conciliatory and emollient tone of voice. He puts it to Shylock that he is not in earnest: that he will not in the end be so malicious as to take the life of a fellow human being and that in the end he will show 'mercy' [cf. Act III Scene 1]. The Duke is calculating that Shylock, out of 'human gentleness and love', will in the event want to 'glance' on Antonio with 'an eye of pity': in short, be magnanimous towards him. For this reason, he expects from Shylock 'a gentle answer': that is, a merciful answer such as a Gentile would give. The precise locution – "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew" – expressly balances Gentile, for which 'gentle' is a noisy pun, with 'Jew'. In effect, the Duke of Venice is saying to Shylock, "You wouldn't be so malicious, would you?" Unfortunately, Shylock – a character in J. M. Murry's pantomime – is retorting, "Oh yes I would!" In short, the Duke has appealed to Shylock's better nature and discovered that he doesn't have one!

Shylock is not being unnecessarily 'obdurate'. He informs the Duke (and reminds us) that he has been to the synagogue (III.1) and has there – by his 'holy Sabbath' – sworn an oath to have his bond. He also reminds the Duke that he cannot 'deny' him his bond without putting Venice's reputation for fair and legal trading in jeopardy; to alter the course of Venetian law would put the city's prosperity in 'danger'.

Shylock is an able rhetorician, a skilled debater. In this speech, his tactic is to ask his opponent the rhetorical question: "What would you do in my circumstances?" In order to justify his determination to do away with Antonio, he compares him to a rat, a pig and a cat; he points out to the Duke that there are many men whose 'humour' is such that they harbour an irrational antipathy to these animals. "Well," says Shylock, "that's how I feel about Antonio; I have 'no firm reason' for wanting to be rid of him, only a 'lodged hate' and a 'certain loathing' which I can't explain any more than you can explain your hostility to a rat or a cat." With this non-committal response, Bassanio expresses an angry dissatisfaction: "This is no answer, thou unfeeling man." For Bassanio is frustrated at Shylock's clever refusal to declare in open court that he hates Antonio on both religious and economic grounds. Bassanio realises that Shylock has bitten his tongue in order to placate the Duke and thereby give himself a better chance of justice; being in a minority of one, Shylock is in no hurry to displease the court.

In this scene, the conflict between Christian and Jew is frequently emphasised by the power of the iambic pentameter. This exchange –

BASSANIO: Do all men kill the things they do not love?
 SHYLOCK: Hates any man the thing he would not kill?

– acquires its effectiveness from the precision of Shylock's retort: not only does Shylock's answer rebut Bassanio's question, but it also matches it word for word, syllable for syllable – and, in actual fact, trumps it. Shylock's answering-back is so dynamic because it is equally rhetorical: in this case, syntactically parallel and correspondingly monosyllabic.

Antonio's interruption of this quarrel is entirely in keeping with his sanguine character. Resigned to his fate at Shylock's hands, he explains calmly to Bassanio why there is no point in arguing with 'the Jew'. Following his failed approach to Shylock in the street, Antonio is fully aware that the Christians – in attempting to abate Shylock's hatred – are dealing with an elemental force. In order to illustrate Shylock's rapacity, Antonio uses three metaphors (each reinforced by a syntactical parallelism) which liken it to a natural phenomenon: a flowing tide, a ravenous wolf and a mountain wind. Controlled by its rhetorical repetitions, Antonio's explanation culminates in a reference to the hardest substance known to man: not carbon, but Shylock's 'Jewish heart'. In conclusion, Antonio exhibits a further 'quietness of spirit' and submits himself with equanimity to the fate which awaits him: "Let me have judgement and the Jew his will." He is the epitome of Christian patience.

At this point, Bassanio tries to buy Shylock off; he doubles his money. Surprisingly for an avaricious Jew, Shylock refuses this mercenary offer and restates his preference: "I would

have my bond" (x 7). Not surprisingly for an 'inhuman wretch', he would rather murder his fellow man. Once more, the conflict between Christian (this time, the Duke) and Jew is expressed by a dynamic exchange of iambic pentameters:

DUKE: How shall thou hope for mercy, rendering none?
SHYLOCK: What judgement shall I dread, doing no wrong?

Once more, Shylock's retort is rhetorically effective, not only because it reproduces the pounding iambic rhythm, but also because it replicates the syntactical structure: for 'mercy', Shylock substitutes 'judgement'; for 'rendering none', he substitutes 'doing no wrong'. He answers rhetorical question with rhetorical question and is at this point ahead in the *debate*.

Shylock seizes the initiative and presses home his advantage by employing his favourite tactic: he asks the Christians to put themselves in his place. He draws attention to the fact that the Christians, in purchasing slaves, are heavily engaged in the ownership of their fellow men whom they treat like asses, dogs and mules [cf. Line 91]. Shylock's rhetorical trick is to ask the Christians whether they would be prepared to free these slaves and let them take over their households ... During the heavy silence in which the Christians privately concede that they would never be prepared to do any such thing, Shylock wins the argument. Once again, the power of the iambic pentameter –

The pound of flesh which I demand of him
Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it.
If you deny me, fie upon your law!

– is responsible for the intensity of the drama [cf. Act III Scene 3]. Shylock states his position and claims his entitlement in emphatic terms which the precise movement of the blank verse reinforces. Here, he is fastidiously insisting upon the letter of the Venetian law: "... 'tis mine and I will have it." What is more, he adds (as Antonio predicted in III.3) that the foundations of Venetian law will begin to crumble if the Duke denies him and does not give him his rightful 'judgement'.

While the Duke awaits Bellario's instructions, Bassanio tries to 'cheer' Antonio up. Antonio sees Bassanio's bravado for what it is and confesses that he is 'a tainted wether of the flock'. In effect, Antonio is confessing to his homosexuality (a 'wether' is a castrated ram) and admitting that he, being the weakest kind of creature, has always expected to die an early death. This moment is the closest that Antonio – essentially, a brave and honourable character – comes to self-pity: "and so let me." At the next moment, he is thinking selflessly of a way in which Bassanio can console himself ('write mine epitaph') after his death.

Enter Nerissa, 'dressed like a lawyer's clerk'. Upon Nerissa's entrance, the scene can begin to rely for additional effectiveness upon dramatic irony.

While the Duke is reading Bellario's letter, there ensues between Shylock and Gratiano another exchange designed to intensify the racial conflict. Although there is no stage-direction, Shylock is clearly sharpening his knife upon his leather sole; such a blood-thirsty action provokes Gratiano into a further diatribe against the 'harsh Jew'/against his 'stony adversary' whom 'no prayers can pierce'. Hereupon, Gratiano is reduced to an outburst of name-calling: in his view, Shylock is a 'damned, execrable dog' whose 'desires are wolvis, bloody, starved, and ravenous'. For insisting only that he be treated with common human decency, Shylock ('thou damned, execrable dog') is accused of acting in a sub-human manner; for simply demanding his civil rights, he is condemned for uncivilised conduct. At this point in the debate, Shylock ("I stand here for law") is feeling secure upon the moral high ground. He remains unintimidated; he is supremely confident that he has nothing to fear. As we shall see, there is a proleptic irony at his expense in that his emphatic confidence in the law will turn out to be hubristic over-confidence.

Once Portia (‘as Balthasar, dressed like a Doctor of Laws’) has entered, the scene acquires its second and final dramatic irony: whereas we know who Balthasar and his/her clerk are, nobody else on stage does.

Having acquainted herself with the wording of the bond, Portia – for the first of seven times in this scene – finds that Shylock has won the case. As we shall see, the function of these seven declarations in his favour is to elicit from Shylock an unconditional approbation of Balthasar’s judgement; it is this approbation to which the Christians will hold him when – later in this scene – he/she [= Balthasar/Portia] finds against him.

Suspecting that Antonio is without a legal escape-route, Portia abandons the fastidious letter of the law for the generous spirit of the law. It is this conflict – between what the words of the bond ‘expressly are’ and how they may be liberally interpreted – that gives this scene its dramatic power:

PORTIA: Then must the Jew be merciful.
SHYLOCK: On what compulsion must I? Tell me that.
PORTIA: The quality of mercy is not strained

Here, Portia is demonstrating her expertise in jurisprudence: realising that she cannot win by the letter of the law, she appeals to the spirit of the law. In short, her legal philosophy is that there can be no justice without mercy. Her argument is that ‘mercy is above’ the common law which mere men administer; as such, ‘it is enthroned in the hearts of kings’ who – in accordance with Elizabethan theology – have a Divine Right to rule; as such, ‘it is an attribute to God himself’ which even a Jew must respect.

Given that man is a fallen creature, then – so Portia argues – ‘none of us’ can be saved from damnation unless God shows us mercy; put another way, man – a descendant of Adam who committed the Original Sin – will not be eager to receive justice because, if he does, then he will be damned. Lest all men be damned, it is therefore necessary to ‘mitigate the justice’ that all men deserve. Being Jewish, Shylock is unimpressed by this liberal interpretation of the law; because he is a Jew, he is concerned only that this ‘strict court of Venice’ should apply the law with rigour. He cannot see what he has to gain by a show of mercy: rather than being ‘blessed’ if he shows mercy, Shylock – having sworn his oath – will be damned.

Hearing Portia find once more in his favour, Shylock (“I crave the law”) rejoices gleefully; as long as the law is on his side, he cannot praise it enough. Duly sensitive to the humane wisdom of Portia’s speech, Bassanio concludes that there can be only one reason why Shylock remains unmoved by it: namely, that ‘malice bears down truth’ and that Shylock, being merciless, is a ‘cruel devil’.

Portia reminds us of the predicament in which the Venetian court finds itself: if it refuses the Jewish merchant his due, then its unlawful decision ‘will be recorded for a precedent’. Believing that his bond is fire-proof, believing that his legal position is unassailable, Shylock strikes up an exultant chorus – “a Daniel come to judgement!” – which once more expresses his uncritical admiration for Balthasar’s interpretation of Venetian law. More proleptic irony: it is not difficult to hear in this gleeful exclamation another note of hubristic over-confidence.

Once she has studied the bond, Portia realises that Antonio’s only hope is to buy Shylock off. The significance of Shylock’s retort –

An oath, an oath! I have an oath in heaven;
Shall I lay perjury upon my soul?

– is to remind us that he cannot take the money offered to him even if he wants to: if he does, then – theologically – he will damn himself by breaking his oath to God. For this valid

reason, there is no chance that he will 'be merciful' as implored ... At this point, Antonio interrupts the legal argument and, despairing of a late reprieve, 'beseeches the court to give the judgement'. Hearing this abject concession, realising that Antonio has given up hope, Shylock exults in his misfortune and lavishes three further praises on Portia's/Balthasar's judicial expertise: "O noble judge ..." At this point, Portia too seems resigned to Antonio's fate and instructs that he 'bare' his chest in readiness for Shylock's whetted knife. Shylock's first reaction to this development is to salivate with joyous anticipation: "Ay, his breast ..." In his flared nostrils, Shylock – 'Nearest his heart' – can scent both victory and blood. This is when Portia draws attention to the pair of scales which Shylock must have carried with him into the court/on to the stage. Even though there was no stage-direction to this effect, it is clear that present on the stage will be this ambiguous symbol of the moral action: both a 'balance ... to weigh the flesh' and a 'balance ... to weigh' the rights and wrongs of the case. Not surprisingly, Shylock ("I have them ready") points self-righteously to the scales because he believes that, in receiving his 'pound of flesh', he is receiving his just deserts.

The final exchanges in this part of the scene are designed further to incriminate Shylock for his illiberal obsession with the letter of the law. Portia's innocent suggestion that Shylock have 'some surgeon' in attendance encounters a further refusal to be lenient; significantly, Shylock's question – "Is it so nominated in the bond?" – epitomises his punctiliousness. If it is 'not so expressed', then Shylock – an avid stickler for legalistic detail – will not prove accommodating; being Jewish, he is unlikely to act out of Christian charity.

Usually, a Director will dramatise this moment by a distant positioning of the two main actors. He will place Portia (in possession of the bond) on the opposite side of the stage from Shylock so that Shylock can then cross the stage in order to re-inspect it. This staging permits a tense moment while Shylock re-reads the bond and then – "I cannot find it, it is not in the bond" – returns it to Portia, elated and triumphant that he need not make even this minor concession. This inhumane reaction appears to confirm that the Christians were right to vilify him for his mean spirit; such parsimony of spirit, such an extreme determination to exact retribution upon them, appears to put him beyond the moral pale. On the other hand, we could conclude that Shylock is in the act of saving both his Jewish integrity and his soul.

Being a Christian soldier, Antonio is 'armed and well prepared' to meet his fate; he bids Bassanio farewell and specifically asks that he 'grieve not' that he is 'fallen to this for you'. In short, Antonio is seeking to exculpate/exonerate Bassanio for his major part in his downfall. On one level, Shakespeare is seeking to pre-empt an audience's reproachful attitude to Bassanio whose selfishness has placed his friend in this mortal danger; on another, he is illustrating that Antonio is a Christian martyr in that he is prepared (as Christ was) to sacrifice his life for others. In this case, the Christian martyrdom will be for the good both of Bassanio (who wins Portia) and Venice (which preserves its integrity as a trading place).

Antonio's abrupt, but appropriate reference to Bassanio's 'honourable wife' (present and incorrect in the shape of Balthasar) is a measure of Shakespeare's expert craftsmanship. Latent from the moment that Portia enters in trans-sexual disguise, the dramatic irony reveals itself here in Antonio's request that she (there 'dressed like a Doctor of Laws') 'be judge' of his selfless love for Bassanio. When Antonio (punning on the cliché) expresses his readiness to pay Bassanio's debt 'with all my heart', Portia – incognito – has an immediate chance to assay at first hand the worth of the Antonio-Bassanio relationship:

But life itself, my wife and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.

Either these are fine words expressing an extravagant sentiment on the spur of an extreme moment or Bassanio – as Portia ruefully observes – has failed his first test as a husband. She *is* 'by to hear him' put Antonio first; likewise, Nerissa hears Gratiano state – not 'behind her back', but right in front of her – that he wishes that 'she were in heaven' [= dead] so that

she might exercise some power over the 'currish Jew'. How can Shakespeare afford such comic light-heartedness in so serious a scene? The answer, of course, is that the irony is not necessarily comic ... Shylock's bristling, rasping interjection – "These be the Christian husbands!" – is a loud, ringing indictment of Christian hypocrisy; it explains that Bassanio and Gratiano's apostasies are no laughing matters and passes a judgement upon their faithlessness to their wives which throws all previous references to 'a faithless Jew' into bitter relief. No wonder Shylock is heart-broken that his Jessica has eloped with such a breed.

For the sixth time, Portia ("the court awards it") sides with Shylock ("Most rightful judge!"). For the seventh time, Portia ("the law allows it") finds in favour of Shylock ("Most learned judge!") At the precise second when Shylock puts the knife to Antonio's bare flesh, at the very instant when he goes to cut it, the function of these ratcheted-up repetitions becomes clear. Portia's line –

Tarry a little, there is something else

– snaps the tension which they have built up and, amid audible sighs of relief, announces that she has – at last! – uncovered a snag. In a moment of the highest drama, she springs upon Shylock a catch-clause: that 'the very words' (Line 251) of the bond by which he has sworn give him 'a pound of flesh', but 'no jot of blood'. Having attached punctilious importance to the 'nominated' terms of the bond, Shylock is stunned to realise that two can play at that game. Having insisted that 'the learned judge' stick strictly to the words of the bond, he is mortified to discover what 'the words expressly are'.

Of course, the case turns upon a legal nicety. In order to confound 'this currish Jew', Portia has had to split a hair: in this case, to draw a distinction between flesh and blood. In short, she has had to resort to a practice by which the law has been dishonoured throughout time: finding a distinction in wording where none exists in fact. Even so, this time-dishonoured practice is sufficient to win the judgement. Having based his entire case upon the letter of the law, Shylock can hardly complain if it is subsequently used against him; his hubristic insistence upon the letter of the law meets its nemesis in Portia's own literal ruling. As a result, the iambic movement of Portia's verse –

Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh ...

– reflects her supreme confidence that the Jew will not this time (the eighth) be so eager to rejoice at her finding in his favour. No longer does her imperative come with the accents of a legal declaration; issued with an ironic politeness, it sounds more like an invitation from a spider to a fly, its accents the accents of a dare ... Portia's speech, marking as it does a devastating turn of events, is a moment of *peripeteia*. Seeing Shylock hoist by his own petard, Gratiano –

O upright judge. Mark, Jew. O learned judge!

– cannot contain his facetious glee: on five occasions, he throws back in Shylock's face the epithets with which Shylock himself had praised Portia when her judgement favoured him. Gratiano's interjections punctuate this passage, composing a chorus in which the precise wording is calculated to remind Shylock that he has received poetic justice.

At first, we may feel sympathy for Shylock: after all, he – who has remained true to his Jewish principles – has been tricked out of his bond only by a lawyer's unprincipled cleverness. However, his response to his sudden reversal of fortune –

I take this offer then. Pay the bond thrice
And let the Christian go

– alters this perception and redresses the moral balance of the argument: if Shylock could not previously take Bassanio's offer because he had sworn 'an oath', then why does he feel able to do so now? He is no longer acting upon the principle which, up to this point, had been a matter of salvation or damnation for him; thwarted, he has changed his mind and put a price (of nine thousand ducats) on his soul just because he's losing. In short, Shylock too has become guilty of the very hypocrisy for which he has rightly condemned his Christian adversaries.

To Gratiano's vindictive delight, Portia informs Shylock that the offer of remuneration no longer stands and that he has no alternative but to 'cut off the flesh'; what is more, he must ensure that he abides by the letter of the bond and cuts neither more nor less than a pound: 'but just a pound of flesh'. Given the impossible circumstances that the letter of the law creates, Portia's question – "Why doth the Jew pause?" – is disingenuous and barely conceals her racial bias.

Shylock's second and third requests for his money back – "Give me my principal and let me go" and "Shall I not have barely my principal?" – further incriminate him; in reverting to avaricious type, he has forsaken his principled stance and become a hypocrite. What should Shylock have done? To be ethically exact, 'rigorous' in his course, he should have gone ahead with an attempt to cut off 'just a pound' of Antonio's flesh and suffered the mortal consequences which Portia ("Thou diest") bluntly describes. In this way, he would have lost his life, but saved his soul.

By electing instead to save his neck, Shylock not only lays perjury upon his soul, but also leaves himself open to the further humiliations that his anti-Semitic enemies proceed to heap upon his head. They will not even let him depart in dignity and peace:

Tarry, Jew!
The law hath yet another hold on you.

Portia detains him with a shrill imperative that trumpets the complete reversal of his fortunes. With dramatic abruptness, she informs him that it is against Venetian law for 'an alien' to conspire against the life of a Venetian citizen and that, since he stands in this 'predicament', he is liable to three penalties: first, Antonio (the injured 'party') is entitled to 'seize one half his goods'; second, the Venetian state is entitled to seize 'the other half'; and third, the state (in the person of the Duke) is entitled to order his execution.

Given that Portia – on seven occasions – has declared 'in the open court' that Shylock is entirely within his rights to claim the pound of flesh which was freely conceded to him, it is rather surprising now to hear that he has all along been guilty of a conspiracy to murder! On the page, we may notice this illogicality and recognise that this court does not dispense justice; on the stage, in the theatre, we are less likely to notice and marvel only at the spectacular turn of events.

Portia's insistence that Shylock grovel to this kangaroo court ("Down therefore ...") is meant to supply another moment of nemesis, for it is ironic that Shylock who sought to strain the quality of mercy should now be required to 'beg mercy of the Duke'. Of course, this twist of the plot is purposely designed to give the Duke an opportunity to demonstrate the Christian's moral superiority over the Jew. The tones in which he grants clemency –

That thou shalt see the difference of our spirit,
I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it

– are not compassionate, but pious and self-righteous. At this point, Shakespeare is playing to the gallery of Christian rogues in his contemporary audience: to further cheering, the Duke – intent on Shylock's complete humiliation – duly announces that Antonio is entitled to half of his 'wealth' and that 'the general state' is entitled to the other. Asked for his opinion, one

'merchant of Venice' (Antonio) behaves with a characteristic magnanimity which seems calculated to put the other (Shylock) to further shame; he waives his own right to 'one half' of Shylock's estate, asking instead that it be put 'in use' [= in trust] for Lorenzo and Jessica by 'a deed of gift' which Shylock – still not to be trusted – must sign 'here in the court'. To 'this favour', Antonio attaches the condition that Shylock 'presently become a Christian'. Of course, this 'favour', while it may spare Shylock both punishment and penury, is not as gracious as it seems: in depriving Shylock of his religion, Antonio is robbing him of both his dignity and his very identity. This being so, it is an act not of Christian forgiveness, but of Christian 'villainy': retribution/vengeance. To coin a phrase, the quality of Antonio's mercy *is* strained – an irony which, in the final analysis, prevents us from sympathising with the self-satisfied Christians.

The Duke of Venice tells Shylock that, if he does not acquiesce to these demands, then he will 'recant the pardon' which he recently 'pronounced': rather than suffer a fate worse than death, Shylock – since he swore an oath in the synagogue – ought at this point to prefer execution in the knowledge that his soul will then be saved. But no: being above all an avaricious and mercenary type, Shylock ("I am content") makes an abject exit. In a word, he capitulates; being guilty of hypocrisy, Shylock ("I am not well") leaves the stage in poor physical and moral health and is seen no more.

ACT IV Scene 2

The function of this short scene (of 19 lines) is to put on stage the hand-over of the rings.

First, Gratiano catches up with Portia and Nerissa and delivers Bassanio's ring. Portia's response to the news that Bassanio has actually parted with the token of her undying love for him ("That cannot be") is utter dismay; on stage, the actress should look more than discomfited/taken aback to learn that her Christian husband is not as good as his word.

Second, Nerissa announces her corresponding intention to 'get' Gratiano's ring. The terms in which she refers to this ring ('which I did make him swear to keep for ever') are specifically pointed at the Christian husbands' suspect capacity for faithfulness/fidelity; they signal that the moral debate – Antonio v Portia/Nerissa – remains alive and open.

Portia's aside – that they will 'have old swearing' [= a bit of 'merry sport'] when they confront their husbands with their missing rings – can never be as jovial as it sounds. Because they raise a moral issue of far-reaching seriousness, these light-hearted reassurances that all shall be well fail ultimately to reassure us. For all the forgiving and let-living of Act V, the tone of the play never quite becomes festive.

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ACT V Scene 1

Set in Belmont, Act V consists of a single scene; its ostensible function is to signal the restoration of harmony to the Christian world. The setting is a bank outside Portia's mansion where no doubt the wild thyme blows and where the moonlight (which symbolises restored harmony) 'shines bright' on an entwined Lorenzo and Jessica. At the start of the scene, this pair of moon-struck lovers engages in stichomythia: between them, they buttress eight descriptions of the romantic night by a systematic use of syntactical parallelism and in this way copulate their love rhetorically. They take part in a flyting match: on five occasions, Lorenzo – three iambs/six syllables per line – finds for the night a simile which commences

"In such a night ..." and on three occasions Jessica responds in identical fashion: "In such a night ..." As Jessica puts it, they try to 'out-night' each other.

Examination of these similes soon reveals that this rhetorical copulation is not the product of a gooey-eyed optimism; in fact, its mythological exemplars (Troilus who 'mounted the Trojan walls', 'Dido with a willow in her hand' and 'old Aeson' rejuvenated by aphrodisiacs) are ironic at the expense of romantic love, being chosen instead for the clearer-sighted vision of human needs that they allow. Shakespeare seeks under the cover of the moonlight to give us a vision of Christian lovers so eager to satisfy their appetites that the betrayal of Shylock by his own daughter –

In such a night
Did Jessica steal from the wealthy Jew

– becomes merely a part of the pattern and, in that pun on 'steal', is even a source of some levity. This reference to Shylock ('the wealthy Jew') is of thematic significance; contrary to initial expectations, it signifies that Act V can never be an unqualified celebration of human harmony. For Act V, Shylock's defeat in Act IV supplies the context: following his public humiliation, his shadow casts itself over the Belmont feast and puts the self-absorbed antics of the jubilant Christians into a critical perspective. As a victimised outsider, Shylock is one of Shakespeare's dissidents: like Don John (*Much Ado*), Jaques (*As You Like It*) and Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*), he dissents from the mood of light-hearted happiness and good fellowship which the couples enjoy at the end of the play; he dissents because the very harmony to which they lay claim has been restored only at a moral and spiritual cost to themselves and therefore not at all. Shylock's residual function, then, is to suggest that the Christians achieve only a pyrrhic victory; his spectre at the Belmont feast reminds us that this festival is in effect his funeral, an unapologetic indulgence in *Schadenfreude*, an unseemly dancing on his imminent grave.

Stephano 'brings word' that Portia 'will before the break of day be here at Belmont'. Such a good girl is she that she has been delayed only by her virtuous insistence on stopping 'by holy crosses' at the road-side where she prays 'for happy wedlock hours'.

Even Launcelot's brief appearance – to announce that Bassanio too 'will be here ere morning' – is staged for its insensitive entertainment-value: "Sola, sola!"

Lorenzo ("How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank") remains intent on enjoying the 'sweet harmony' of the Belmont atmosphere, its 'soft stillness', its tranquillity. He points at the star-lit sky ('thick inlaid with patens of bright gold') which allegedly reflects this serenity and he summons musicians to complement his mood with a moonlight serenade.

It is Jessica ("I am never merry when I hear sweet music") who sounds a discordant note. She is not happy in herself; arguably, she is in search of a lost chord, her Jewish identity. Lorenzo tells her that 'the sweet power of music' can subdue and soothe even the most troubled 'spirits'; side-swiping at Shylock's aversion to 'the wry-necked fife', he adds that 'the man that hath no music in himself' and cannot hear the 'concord of sweet sounds' is fit only 'for treasons' and not to 'be trusted'. No wonder that Jessica feels ill at ease ...

On her return to Belmont, Portia's third line of iambic pentameter – "So shines a good deed in a naughty world" – is of immense thematic significance and needs to be heard in two contexts. First, it refers in general to the condition of the world – 'naughty' – in which Renaissance men and women [= fallen creatures] must nevertheless try to act with integrity: that is, not hypocritically. Second, it refers in particular to this Renaissance woman's glib triumph over Shylock in Act IV; it confirms that Portia, having out-witted and humiliated him, is full of a smug self-satisfaction to which a Christian wife can never be fully entitled and it invites us to inquire how she can be so happy with self-exoneration/afford to feel so pleased with herself ...

The answer must be that her feeling of racial superiority blinds her to her own hypocrisy/her own 'naughtiness'.

Dramatic ironies occur when Bassanio introduces Antonio ("This is Antonio") to Portia. Portia ('as I hear') pretends never to have met him before in her life.

Just as the narrative of the scene seems to be grinding to a halt, 'a quarrel' breaks out between Gratiano and Nerissa: of course, it concerns the missing ring. From this moment onwards, the scene becomes richly comic on account of the multiple dramatic ironies that it involves: we know, whereas Bassanio and Gratiano do not, that Portia and Nerissa were the judge and the judge's clerk (both of course 'gelt') to whom they have given away their rings.

Gratiano's first tactic is to minimise the scale of the charge that Nerissa levels against him: that breaking one's word to one's wife (one's 'oaths of love') is a major form of disloyalty. He retorts that he has given away only 'a hoop of gold, a paltry ring' on which nothing more depended than the market-value; but Nerissa reminds him that he swore 'vehement oaths' for which he ought to have more respect. By insisting that he is guilty of only a minor infidelity, Gratiano exhibits the very flippancy for which Shylock had previously condemned him; at this point, Shylock's dismissive sneer – "These be the Christian husbands" – should be ringing in our ears ... Whereas Gratiano parts 'slightly' with his ring, Shylock – remember – would never have given away the turquoise ring which he received from his late wife Leah when he was a bachelor (III.1). The bachelor-contrast is precise, but comes with a caveat: for all of his moral rigour, Shylock too proved unable to obey the oath that he swore [= to have Antonio's heart 'if he forfeit']. The conclusion, then, must be that good deeds hardly ever shine in our naughty world.

Of course, the conduct of the two deuteragonists (Gratiano and Nerissa) is designed to foreshadow exactly that of the two protagonists: Bassanio and Portia. As Portia reminds us, the context for the final movement of the plot is supplied by the solemn 'oaths' that both Bassanio and Gratiano swore in Act III Scene 2. Her tactic is to rebuke Gratiano for having parted with 'a thing ... riveted with faith' to his finger and at the same time to state disingenuously that her Bassanio would never do any such thing, for it would – so he has sworn – 'presage the ruin' of his love!

As Bassanio cringes, Gratiano – in a selfish attempt to exculpate himself – shows that he is entirely without moral scruples and prepared to betray even his best friend: "My Lord Bassanio gave his ring away ..." In this context, Portia's question – "What ring gave you my lord?" – ought not in the theatre to arouse much laughter: after all, both husbands stand convicted of serious breaches of trust and cannot complain if their wives 'exclaim on' them. That the scene proceeds in a jocular vein owes much to Portia's reassurance that only 'a madwoman' would forever 'hold out enemy' to her husband in the mitigating circumstances. Indeed, Bassanio presses this circumstantial point in his defence. This defence Shakespeare organises into a hypothesis ("If you did know to whom I gave the ring ...") which occupies five lines of the verse, each one of which ends with 'the ring'; to counter-attack, Portia makes an identical use of syntactical parallelism ("If you had known the virtue of the ring ...") which enables her to express rhetorically her indignation at Bassanio's parting 'with the ring'. Between them, Bassanio and Portia manage to mention 'the ring' no fewer than ten times in sixteen lines! In the theatre, this verbal exercise is hilariously effective: what results (as it happens) is not a passage of tedious repetition, but an opportunity for the two actors to excel at verse-speaking, changing their intonations in order to develop their particular senses of grievance. These are high jinks for such a sombre issue ...

Bassanio's perplexity ("What should I say, sweet lady?") stems directly from the dilemma in which he had found himself: he 'was beset with shame' (that he had endangered Antonio's life) 'and courtesy' (which he owed to the 'civil doctor' who had saved it at the last minute). What does a man say and do in such morally impossible situations?

Had you been there I think you would have begged
The ring of me to give the worthy doctor ...

... which, of course, she was and she did. This being so, Portia's dilemma [= whether or not to forgive Bassanio for breaking his marriage-vow] replicates not only Bassanio's dilemma, but also every other moral dilemma with which this play has confronted both its characters (such as Launcelot in Act II Scene 2) and its audiences.

Portia and Nerissa's first reaction to their husbands' broken promises is to withhold conjugal rights: "By heaven, I will ne'er come in your bed ..." (Portia)/"Nor I in yours ..." (Nerissa). Vocally, they purport to take the treacherous loss of their love-tokens with due seriousness. The other seriousness which Elizabethan idiom attaches to a ring is as a metaphor for a vagina: in giving away their wives' literal rings to two men, Bassanio and Gratiano have in effect given away their wives sexually. For which reason Portia proposes secondly to 'become as liberal' in her favours [= as unfaithful] as Bassanio has been; by the same principle, Nerissa resolves to have the doctor's clerk for her 'bedfellow'. To their husbands' dismay, both women finally reproduce the rings, but confess to having retrieved them after spending the previous night in the respective beds of 'the doctor' and 'the doctor's clerk': that is, in their own beds! Hypocritically, Gratiano ("What, are we cuckolds ..?") stands aghast at such apparent infidelity.

But of course Portia and Nerissa prove only to have been teasing their husbands with their vaginal rings: after having demonstrated the potential consequences of two-faced behaviour, Portia ('the doctor') and 'Nerissa there her clerk' close the discrepancy of awareness which has caused such hilarity, but kept them from their husbands' beds; by now, they are ready to relent, listen to the latest pledge ("By my soul, I swear I never more will break an oath ...") and consummate their marriages. In the final analysis, the belles of Belmont are two frustrated females who cannot wait to satisfy their lusts at the hands of a pair of unprincipled roués. Even though she may have qualms about Bassanio's 'double self', Portia is no longer prepared to let them stand in the way of sexual gratification; after an enforced and protracted celibacy, she has become morally complacent. It is not therefore surprising that Shylock scoffs at these social butterflies or that some Directors choose to portray them as decadent creatures who speak in la-di-dah tones of voice.

Once more, Portia becomes mistress of the ceremonies in her own household and hurries proceedings to their clumsy conclusions: for instance, Antonio is understandably 'dumb' to discover in a letter (magically produced by Portia) that three of his 'argosies are richly come to harbour suddenly'; more credibly, Lorenzo and Jessica are delighted to receive the 'special deed of gift' that Shylock has signed. Given again her 'godlike' function, it is fitting that Portia should 'drop manna in the way of starvèd people' (Lorenzo).

To the end, Gratiano is a moral scoundrel/a rogue who does not suffer from a guilty conscience. He forgets his recent misdemeanour and expresses an interest only in getting Nerissa into bed:

Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring.

True at least to his crude self, he is neither looking at nor thinking of her jewellery: in graphic terms, he proposes to keep on penetrating Nerissa's ring until both of them feel 'sore'. For Gratiano, marriage is not a solemn undertaking; he welcomes it primarily because it promises unlimited access to a woman's body [= her pounds of flesh]. Given this final couplet, the emphasis in the end comes to rest upon the sordid, self-indulgent materialism of the Christians to whom the glistening surfaces of Belmont are proverbially suited.

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